

WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT

Address by Dr. Patrick J. HILLERY, Vice-President
of the Commission of the European Communities,
to a colloquium "Women in the European Community",
in the Palais d'Egmont, Brussels, on Friday,
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Introduction

I should like to begin by thanking my colleague, Vice-President Scarascia for the invitation to address this colloquium. Employment is a topic of fundamental importance in the Community today and I am glad to have this opportunity to discuss it with you. The fact that you all hold positions of influence in public life is extremely important and I hope that your meeting together here will encourage and strengthen the sustained effort to achieve equality of treatment for women in which we are all engaged. I hope indeed that on a future occasion it will be possible to welcome even wider participation. An increasing male commitment to our work is essential. Although it is male attitudes that are most in need of change, today's reality is that men control the means of change. For this reason alone, a much greater involvement by women in the political life of our Community and its member States is vital.

Community Competence

One of the most frustrating aspects of political involvement is the fact that in many cases one's enthusiasm for change must adapt to the practical realities of implementation through existing institutional machinery. It is important at the outset to remind you therefore of the limitations to the scope of Community action.

The Treaty establishing the Community limits the Commission's competence to the employment problems of women working outside the home. In the discussions on our Social Action Programme the Council of Ministers endorsed the broadest possible interpretation of this competence in adopting as an objective the reconciliation of family responsibilities with job aspirations. Thus it is clear that many of the important subjects covered by the survey and likely to be discussed in this colloquium may well fall outside the duties and responsibilities of the Commission.

Even though there are serious limitations on what we can achieve through Community legislation, the significance of our work and achievements in the field of employment - wages, promotion, training and social security - is widely recognised. These are all important areas in which women do suffer from serious injustices. Moreover, there are clear indications that the work we are doing for women's equality in employment reaches well beyond the confines of this subject in influencing public and Governmental opinion on the broader issues related to it.

Assessment of Problem

When we came to drawing up a policy for women's employment in the Community it was necessary first to establish as scientifically as possible the salient features of the problem and to this end we instituted experts' surveys. These originally related to the six founding States but were subsequently extended to the three newcomers. It emerged that the principal handicaps facing women at work in our Community, apart from the obvious one of inequality of pay, were as follows :-

- (i) Because of lack of opportunities in education and in training women are ill-prepared for the exercise of a trade or profession;
- (ii) women's employment is concentrated in certain sectors (notably the services) and in certain types of less skilled jobs where wages are lower and opportunities for promotion are fewer;
- (iii) the development of the working career of many women is decisively influenced by marriage and motherhood. Women wishing to return to work after absences for childbirth or child-rearing encounter serious difficulties in getting a job or resuming their careers at the same level;
- (iv) in addition, women are often penalised as a result of prejudice. In the eyes of many employers, a woman candidate for a job is a potential absentee.

All these have combined to bring about the situation where the number of women in managerial staff and in decision-influencing positions in public life is very small.

The Two Directives

The Commission's first task was to deal with the question of equal pay. This subject was of course already covered by Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome but despite this provision and a subsequent recommendation adopted by the member States the principle of equal pay had not been fully implemented. The Commission judged it necessary therefore to propose a Directive to the Council defining more closely the obligations of the member States in this matter and extending the notion of equal pay for equal work to also include work of equal value. The Directive also provided specifically for a woman's right to go to court in cases of breach of the principle of equal pay. The Directive was unanimously accepted by the member States as part of the Social Action Programme last year and came into force on 10th February of this year.

Important as it was to eliminate discrimination in pay, this, of course, is only one aspect of the more general problem of discrimination with which women are faced in the field of employment. Getting the proper rate for the job is only part of the story. The problem of access to the high level jobs also had to be tackled. Therefore the next logical step was the preparation of a second Directive on equality of opportunity to fight against discrimination in matters of access to employment, promotion and vocational training and equality in working conditions. This second Directive was adopted by the Council last December. Its principal provisions are :

- any woman who considers herself discriminated against as regards access to employment, vocational training, promotion and working conditions can bring a case to the national courts and if necessary the European Court of Justice;
- discriminatory provisions appearing in regulations, administrative provisions, collective agreements, individual contracts of employment and staff regulations have to be abolished;
- a woman who lodges a complaint has to be protected against dismissal or any other serious steps taken by employers in retaliation.

One hears, all too often these days, of lack of progress in various fields in the Community. It is particularly satisfactory that the Council adopted in the case of this important Directive, virtually the entire substance of the Commission's proposals.

These two Directives represent a major step forward in the social progress of millions of women in the Community. But that is not the end of the road. A more long-term job needs to be done in changing traditional anti-feminist attitudes and creating a climate in which it will be regarded as normal that women be treated as men are on their individual merits. It was for this reason that the Commission published simultaneously with its proposal for a Directive on equal opportunity a Memorandum spelling out for the Community the range of obstacles facing women in the employment field and possible ways of meeting them. It stressed, for example, the need for a fundamental reorientation of basic education and vocational training in the Community to give girls an equal opportunity in competing for future careers. It also raised a number of related issues such as the importance of adequate recognition of the social function of motherhood. In this context I was particularly interested, as Commissioner for Social Affairs, to note the findings regarding employment of the valuable survey carried out under Mr. Scarascia's auspices.

The opinions expressed show an encouragingly high degree of interest in and concern for the subjects covered by the two Directives and the Memorandum : equal pay; lack of promotion prospects; child-care facilities; flexible working hours; and the problems of mothers returning to work.

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This Year's Programme

I would like now to tell you about the actions envisaged by the Commission for the current year.

Filming has already started in the production of a television film on equality between men and women at work for distribution throughout the member States. I need hardly stress the importance of adequate information, not only to women themselves but to the public as a whole, on the rights and obligations which devolve from the Community Directives. The film is aimed at improving information on this point and so can contribute to the more effective enforcement of the law. The film should also have the secondary effect of improving the general climate regarding training and promotion for women.

I have already mentioned the importance of vocational training and vocational guidance. This is an area where we think it would be useful to have a Commission Recommendation to the member States for the raising of standards throughout the Community. Following-up a seminar on the subject held in Paris last November, we are now working on a draft Recommendation for the member States.

The principal Community instrument to support vocational training is of course the Social Fund. There are opportunities for special projects for women's training in the Social Fund but we think that it is necessary to make a special promotional effort to ensure that these opportunities are availed of to a larger extent than has been the case up to the present.

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The Commission is also fully aware of the fact that women in agriculture are faced with specific problems that are related to the status of workers in this sector. In order to promote a better understanding of these problems with a view to their solution, the Commission intends to make a study of the working conditions of women working in agriculture and the particular situation of women in farming families. Needless to say, this study will involve close cooperation with representatives of the agricultural sector.

If we are to be consistent with the principles of equal pay and equal opportunity we must extend them into the field of social security where at present serious discrimination exists to the disadvantage of women. The Council of Ministers has already approved the principle of equality of treatment for women in social security and it has been agreed that the Commission should come forward with specific proposals on the subject. Our services have been drawing up an inventory of cases of discrimination and inequality and the object is to prepare a draft proposal for a first legal instrument in this field during the present year.

The Commission is sometimes accused of preaching about equality of opportunity for women without considering the situation of its own staff. My colleague, Mr. Borschette, as Commissioner for Personnel, and myself, as Commissioner for Social Affairs, recently sponsored a survey by some women members of our staff to establish the views of all the women employees of the Commission on a wide range of issues related to working conditions. We have now set up a joint working group to examine the findings of this survey and to see what practical action can be taken for improvement.

The increasing awareness of women of the injustices to which they are subjected and their justifiable insistence on being accorded their fair role in society is the strongest hope for the success of the movement for equality for women. It does not help the women's cause that the growth of this movement is coinciding with a time of considerable economic difficulty and serious unemployment. But it must be recognised that a great deal of progress depends not on increased expenditure but on a more equitable sharing of existing resources. Inevitably some aspects of our policy, like for example, elimination of discriminations in social/^{security}will cost money. We must, however, be on our guard against any suggestion that justice and equality are to prevail only in times of plenty. Nor can we accept that any particular group in society should have to carry an unfair share of the hardships. The Commission has consistently taken the line that these hardships must be distributed fairly throughout all the sections of the Community.

In overcoming the present crisis we have to re-examine our responsibilities and roles in society. There can be no acceptable remedy based on a concept of inequality. Rather we must strive to build a Community which is strongly committed to the principle of social justice. This is the only way in which we can establish a Community which will appeal to the peoples of our countries and which will have that "human face" which was a basic objective for the enlarged Community.

While the achievement of social justice must be foremost in our thinking, there is also a real benefit to society in improving the opportunities open to women. I believe that our society has an enormous amount to gain from all the talent, imagination and energy of women which up to the present has not been allowed to develop.

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